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ABSTRACT

The Systems Theory of families conceptualizes not only the interaction between family members but also the interaction between families and other systems, such as schools. This paper has given a brief review of the concepts and some basic techniques. Clinical examples have been used to show the relationship and application to school difficulties. Systems Theory concepts and techniques are of use, therefore, not only for freeing up individual family members for better achievement, but also for correcting similar problem patterns between student and teacher, family and school, or school staff. The concepts beg for application within schools, but this seems not to have been widely attempted. Many reasons are suggested by skeptics within the educational systems; however, this is often part of the educational system's pattern and an attempt to maintain the status quo. Use of the concepts and techniques would allow for understanding and clearing of the educational system pathology. (Author)

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THE USE OF FAMILY THERAPY CONCEPTS AND TECHNIQUES

IN GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING

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THE USE OF FAMILY THERAPY CONCEPTS AND TECHNIQUES IN GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING

I INTRODUCTION:

This paper will focus on the "systems" concepts and techniques of family therapy which are of practical use in guidance and counselling. The stress will be on the transferability and application of the concepts and techniques to the family-school system, teacher-student system and the educational system itself.

The paper is intended neither to train people in techniques nor to be wholly comprehensive. It is hoped rather that demonstration and discussion of the concepts and techniques will stimulate a further pursuit by those in the guidance and counselling field. Discussion will centre first on the concepts and then on some practical techniques, and by examples, enlarge on their usefulness.

II CONCEPTUAL MODEL:

In the systems theory conceptual model, the family is seen as a system in which all members interact, move, monitor and reward the behavior of each other. An analogy would be a multitude of chemical solutions separated by semipermeable membranes of differing properties. The solutions will interact but in different ways to reach a status quo, and any change in one leads to counter reactions by the others.

The issue, then, is one of perspective when viewing the family. Change in the family system is looked to for alteration of any individual member's behavior. What is focused on is the quality and nature of the interactions between members (i.e. the property of the semipermeable membranes).

In addition, systems theory focuses on the quality of the family's interaction with other systems such as school, law, and employment. It is for this reason that the concepts and techniques allow for a better understanding of the individual within his or her family, and in addition, allow for a better understanding of family-school conflicts, student-school conflicts, and internal school problems.

A. Interface Interactions:

But what are these interface interactions repeatedly mentioned? In condensing Haley's work, Beels and Ferber enunciate human communication as follows:[1]

i) All behaviour is communicative. Even slience communicates a message to the rest of the family.

ii) Messages can have "report" or "command" function, i.e. a mother can state to her child, "It is raining out", and report a fact. She can also be giving an implicit command, "Put your coat on and carry your umbrella". Thus information is often "reported" by content, while "command" may involve content, inflection, intonation, and non-verbal cues in varying degrees.

iii) Command messages define the relationship between members of the family.

iv) In families, command messages become patterned after a period of time, into family rules.

v) Changes in the stability of the rules and patterns of the family interaction are closely monitored by all members of the family. There is great resistance to changing the defined rules. Family members will act to force a return to the defined rules, should anyone break away.

vi) Inability to change the rules is what leads to "systems pathology". The family system that is producing difficulty for one of its members resists change and the member has increasing difficulty.

III APPLICATIONS:

Several significant applications arise from these percepts:

i) Individual difficulties and ramifications,

ii) The carrying of pattern behavior outside the family,

iii) The interaction between family and other systems,

iv) School system interactions.

i) Individual Problems:

Individual problems created by the family system can be serious, and yet change will be mitigated against. Consideration of your own experiences usually recalls countless examples of good, sound guidance and counselling leading to set plans and objectives. Suddenly these are reversed - often by family system pressures. Understanding the family systems in such cases would allow either working through with the family or planning alternative courses to prevent sabotage.

ii) Patterns of Interaction:

As patterns of interaction are fixed, the individual carries and sets up a similar repertoire in interpersonal relations outside of the family. This applies in school settings where the pupil will attempt to set up patterns similar to those at home.

> Clinical Example: A case example in point was a family seen because of a request for special placement of their daughter, the youngest in a family with three children. There had been previous multiple involvement of psychiatric clinics and special school programs. The Identified Patient, a non-verbal girl of thirteen, had previously been working at a grade three level. She had an older sister, age 18, in vocational school doing poorly, and a brother who was doing moderately well in a regular school program.

In the first session the father sat in the corner, half turned away, and was very angry. To all of his outbursts, both daughters reacted with a cowering and withdrawing attitude.

Mother huddled near the children on the opposite side of the room and was over-attentive to all their needs. She answered for them and verbalized "their" feelings and reactions.

Meetings with the school where the youngest daughter was placed revealed that she tended to be dependent and passive with female teachers and withdrawn and cowering with male teachers (as at home). The teachers' reaction was, for the females one of sympathy and aid, while the male teachers tended to back off and become frustrated and angry (as at home). Thus the patterns at home were continued at school until discussion and specific plans were initiated to break them. Being made aware of the patterns that occurred in the family, the teachers were able to react in an opposite way to force some alteration with good results. Family therapy altered the home situation.

It is this understanding of the family and the way they interact which will allow the teacher and school personnel to become familiar with the why and how of difficult behavior problems within the school setting.

iii) Family-School Conflicts:

Interactions between the family and school are also better understood considering the precepts. Due to problems within a family they will interact in ways to reach a balance - albeit unhealthy. When they deal with other systems, such as schools, they will require that any intervention support the continuity of the "sick" situation.

> Clinical Example: The same family discussed just previously, furnishes a good example. The father had opted out of his role and the wife was left in charge. The youngest girl was completely over-protected by the mother, who was still putting her to bed and reading her bed-time stories at the age of thirteen. During sessions where the family and representatives of both girls' schools were present, it was pointed out and clarified for all that the mother always dealt in a way to reduce the schools' expectations around both girls.

> The father, who had changed after numerous family therapy sessions, was able to come in and correct this by labelling his wife "making excuses again".
>
> In addition, the school personnel became even more aware of the mother's attempts to perpetuate the old patterns. To prevent this, they told the parents of considerable examples indicating marked improvement on the parts of both girls if they were pushed. They confronted the parents around doing likewise at home. The staff were reassured about taking this stand by seeing the family situation.

Better understanding of family concepts can therefore aid in sorting out the problems schools can have in dealing with the family.

iv) School System Interaction:

Up to now, the focus has been on the family; however, it has been implied that the school itself is another system. The internal problems of the staff as well as teacher-student problem, may be due therefore to difficulties related to the internal school system interaction and communication difficulties.

If guidance and counselling personnel, therefore, grasp and make use of the concepts and techniques of family therapy, they will be useful for dealing with the individual student, the family, the family-school conflicts, and within the school around staff conflicts and teacher-student conflicts.

IV A FEW REMARKS ABOUT TECHNIQUES:

General Comments:

The family interviewer must install himself as a changer and introduce himself in such a way as to avoid becoming regulated himself by the system or no change will occur. The difficulty occurs when the interviewer himself becomes responsive to the implicit and unperceived rules of family

functions. For this reason, it is important that the interviewer stay outside the family and simply monitor the command rules and interaction patterns.

The following remarks are geared to some simple, basic techniques that stress two major points which are: the approach is to 1)The Here and Now - what is taking place during the family session; and to 2) Uncover the Hidden Messages that are being communicated or "listening with a third ear". By making the interactions in the immediate situation clear, the family is forced during the session to become aware of their communication with each other. The responsibility for changing that communication is left up to the family as a whole.

1) Dealing With the Here and Now:

As already noted, one presumption is that the family deals in a fixed pattern of communication. This pattern continues to operate during the session. By having the family deal with these patterns and interaction during the session, they are forced to become immediately aware of them. Further, the therapist, dealing with the here and now, avoids being caught up with the often distorted historical material. Also, when the historical material does come up secondary to dealing with immediate problems, there will be much more feeling associated with it rather than an historical, blow-by-blow account, which is obtained by the more usual manner.

2) Underlying Messages:

By listening with the "third ear", the therapist tries to identify the underlying message, or better still, have family members identify it. One can then ask family members, "What is your wife saying to you?" or "What message is she giving you?". The therapist delineates the message if

the family can't. Time does not allow for description of all the message patterns seen, but a considerable literature is obtainable.

V APPLICATION IN SCHOOLS:

"A counsellor could use these concepts and enter the field of conflicts (such as family-school, teacher-teacher, teacher-student) in the same way a family therapist enters the family. The family therapist sees the problem student as a manifestation of maladaption within the family system. A counsellor could enter the field to deal with the needs of the school, student, and family systems. He can do so effectively by using the family therapy techniques of dealing with the main interface problems of the subsystems (individual, school, family)."[2]

Dealing in the here and now, he facilitates interaction and then points out the more hidden, implicit messages. He may do this indirectly. An example would be the use of such techniques in discussing cases with teachers. Saying, "What is he (the student) doing to you?" or "What do you think the real message is?" often clarified issues for teachers without any further intervention, one local adjustment counsellor found.

On the other hand, the use of the same approach in interviews with a teacher and student, school personnel and family, family and student, or just teacher groups, is viable, practical and yields results.

CONCLUSION:

The Systems theory of families conceptualizes not only the interaction between family members, but also the interaction between families and other systems, such as schools. This paper has given a brief

review of the concepts and some basic techniques. Clinical examples have been used to show the relationship and application to school difficulties.

Systems Theory concepts and techniques are of use, therefore, not only for freeing up individual family members for better achievement, but also for correcting similar problem patterns between student and teacher, family and school, or between school staff.

The concepts beg for application within schools but this seems not to have been widely attempted. Many reasons are suggested by skeptics within the educational systems; however, this is often part of the educational system's pattern and an attempt to maintain the status quo. Use of the concepts and techniques would allow for understanding and clearing the educational system pathology.

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